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Ella Wheeler Wilcox

CAMEOS

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ELLA WHEELER WILCOX

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CAMEOS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

POEMS OF PASSION
POEMS OF PLEASURE
POEMS OF POWER
POEMS OF CHEER
POEMS OF SENTIMENT
POEMS OF PROGRESS
POEMS OF EXPERIENCE
THE KINGDOM OF LOVE
MAURINE
THREE WOMEN
YESTERDAYS
THE ENGLISHMAN

In the Press

POEMS OF PROBLEMS

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THE GARDEN OF FORGOTTEN THINGS

I

THE GARDEN OF FORGOTTEN THINGS

It was the hour when Day keeps tryst with Dusk that I found it. A single star glowed like a beacon above the rim of the earth; and in the still waters of a dreaming Cove, I saw the inverted reflection of midsummer trees.

It was a subtle odour which lured me into the tangled paths of memory; an elusive fragrance, blowing up from the Meadows of The-Used-To-Be; and it led me on, and on, until the House of Reality was lost to sight.

I found myself wandering in strange places, through dim ways, toward a nameless, magnetic goal.

I do not know why I pressed forward; the House of Reality was very beautiful and I had long dwelt there, with Content guarding my portal, and Love abiding within.

But when an old perfume calls, memory obeys.

Having set forth, I proceeded, possessed equally by curiosity and fear; for the road grew lonelier, and an indefinable sadness pervaded the atmosphere.

Presently I came to a bridge, which bore evidences of having been an enchanting structure; but now it was broken and decayed, and under it lay

the arid bed of a vanished stream. Hard by, a creaking sign-board swung from a leaning mile-post; and by the pale light of the increasing stars, I read these half-effaced words, "The Bridge of Dreams, spanning the River of Youth."

Across the bridge I hurried; and just on the other side I saw it—the Garden of Forgotten Things.

The entrance was choked by weeds; for no foot had trodden there in many a year; but, moved with desperate courage and a desire to finish this unpremeditated journey, I forged forward.

A phosphorus light shed a peculiar and awesome radiance over the tangled grasses at my feet.

I leaned low, and gazed at the spot

whereon I stood. It was a partially buried headstone, bearing the name of a friend loved and lost in my first youth.

Once that stone stood erect, amidst carefully tended flowers, and the path leading to it had been kept smooth by the feet of faithful friendship.

But that was long and long ago, and for decades of time the neglected stone had been pressing its sorrowful face against the bosom of earth, lonely and forgotten by the world.

A weird shape flitted beside me as I passed on. So absorbed was I with suddenly awakened recollections of my lost friend, that I paid little heed to the shape; but it pressed closer, and at last I turned, to see the face of an early

Passion, once beautiful with vivid life, but now an empty mask, from which all expression had fled.

"Do not follow me," I cried, accelerating my steps. "There is nothing—nothing for us to say."

"There is nothing," answered the shape, as it departed into the shadows from whence it came.

The way seemed newly desolate, and a wide-winged bird wheeled above my head, giving utterance to strange cries.

As he cried, that subtle, haunting odour blew up again from the Meadows of The-Used-To-Be; and old raptures, old sorrows, vanished friendships, and ephemeral loves, lost ideals and outlived pleasures, trooped behind me, a shadowy

horde, starred with pallid faces of the dead.

The Garden of Forgotten Things, filled with this nebulous host of presences, became insupportable.

I turned, affrighted, and fled back: back to the House of Reality, past the keeper of the portal, whose face had grown troubled over my absence, I sped, straight into the arms of Abiding Love.

VOICES

II

VOICES

Voices affect me like music, like perfumes, like scenes in nature.

I have heard the voice of a man or a woman who was not visible, and all the atmosphere changed as if a sudden wind had arisen, or as if an eclipse had taken place at noonday, or as if a "light that never was on land or sea" had risen in the skies at night.

Once in the desert of the commonplace I heard a voice, and instantly I was enveloped in beauty. Statues

gleamed from hidden niches, and fountains played, and there were culture and repose and charm over all my world.

Voices are exact reflections of the mind and soul; or they are echoes from past incarnations.

Not all soft voices are pleasant; not all loud voices are unpleasant. It depends upon the quality.

There is a woman who is crowned with youth and classic beauty; she is like a marble goddess to see, and oft-times I have beheld her moving about exquisitely kept lawns under the shadow of great trees.

She is a picture to please the eye; a picture — until she speaks. Always when her voice reaches my ears the

same thing occurs; the beautiful lawns give place to ragged, unkempt farm-house yards; the great trees vanish, and I see only forlorn buildings, dilapidated stables, men in shirt-sleeves and "suspenders" coming home tired with toil; women, with calico aprons and prematurely faded faces, performing disagreeable duties. The utterly commonplace and unromantic side of life is expressed by the voice of this beautiful woman.

It is like a blow to my ear!

Her own nature is devoid of romance. There is no sentiment in her soul. And so the voice tells the story of temperamental poverty, despite her appearance and surroundings.

Another woman who is sweet and

wholesome to look upon, and normal in every respect, speaks, and I grow dazed as under the influence of some strange narcotic.

She may discuss weather or bonnets; she may speak of art and literature, or she may talk of current gossip; yet the same result invariably follows. There is a little blur over my brain, a peculiar haze, and the real things of life seem so far away, and I imagine incense curling up from censers in some dim room. Some time, in some past life, she has been a part of such conditions.

Once I met a man of talents, a man of whom the world had great hopes, of whom it expected wonderful achievements. But after I had heard him

speak I ceased to believe in his future. His voice was light, as thin water running over shallow places; it could not be a voice of the depths.

I know a man whose voice will bring calm out of turmoil, peace out of discord, and rest out of weariness. Men, women, children, animals, all feel the magnetism and charm of his modulated tones. Each sentence is a caress, however dignified the words may be.

There are voices which rouse you to action, which stir you with ambition; and there are others which fill you with despondency. There are voices which irritate you like the buzzing of an insect or the grating of a file; and voices which hiss like serpents and snap like turtles.

Sometimes from the rosebud mouth of youth proceeds the cracked voice of age; and from feminine lips, the deep bass of masculine tones. But most dreadful of all is the thin piping voice of femininity issuing from the bearded lips of man.

That which we are, that which we have been in some former incarnation, speaks in our tones.

That which we are, and the result of that which we have been, can be changed and modified by the cultivation of the voice.

Were all the world to speak in a melodious and pleasing voice, many of the harsh and disagreeable qualities in human nature would disappear.

What does your voice express?

Listen, and analyze it, and then ask your best friend, if you are brave enough to hear the answer.

THE APPARITION

III

THE APPARITION

THE Mother entered the boudoir and her daughter closed the door behind her.

Then she seated herself, facing the Girl with a Dream in her eyes, and took her hand.

"I want to talk with you this morning," she began. "Will you listen?"

A faint shadow crossed the face of the Girl, and the Dream in her eyes fled, affrighted.

But she answered with a single acquiescing, and perhaps appealing, monosyllable. "Yes," she said.

"It is about Paul," the Mother continued; "I think he comes here too often.

"You are so young—too young to have men calling to see you. It is foolish to distract your mind from music and studies with the nonsense which men talk to girls."

The Girl leaned forward, but her glance reached beyond her Mother's chair, and she seemed to listen to some sound other than her Mother's voice.

"Pardon me, Mother," she said, "but I am sure someone knocked at the door."

The Mother went to the door, opened it, and peered into the corridor.

"There is no one in sight," she said, and resumed her seat.

"Paul is a fine fellow, I know," she continued, "but he, too, is wasting time in calling on you so often. He should be thinking of his future, and of the work he is given to do in life, and he should be applying himself seriously to it."

"But, Mother, he often talks to me of just these things; and he says he always goes away stirred with new and noble ambition after he has seen me. I am an encouragement to him."

The Mother frowned. "That is an old platitude," she said. "Men have talked that way to women since the world began; it means nothing, my child. It is a waste of your time to listen to such things."

Again the Girl leaned forward.

"Mother, there is surely someone trying to enter the door."

"There is no one, I tell you," repeated the Mother impatiently, "and you must listen to me until I have finished. The time you sacrifice to Paul would make you proficient in French or on the piano; for you not only give him time when he calls, but you read his notes, and you dress for him, and you are growing idle and dreamy when he is not here. I really must insist that you ask Paul to remain away, and that you return to your old habits of study."

The Girl touched her Mother's arm, and her eyes were dilated.

"Someone came into the room just

then," she said. "Someone is behind you, Mother."

The Mother turned with a start, but saw nothing. "You are trying to distract me, but I shall finish what I came to say," and her voice grew stern. "Men from the cradle to the grave have always been in the habit of encroaching on woman's time, without apology. They expect her to bestow sympathy, diversion, and amusement, and they never think they are obliged to give anything in return. You must learn to understand them at their real value, and to direct your life accordingly."

"But Paul gives me his society in return for mine," the Girl replied, "and

I enjoy him; he is interesting and attractive."

The Mother's frown deepened; there was asperity in her tone. "That is mere sentimental nonsense. You are too young to know whether a man is interesting or attractive. You should not think of such things; you should be thinking only of your studies at this age."

"Mother, there is—there is someone —something behind you."

The Mother rose. "You need a specialist for nervous disorders," she said. "Your brain has become visionary. Your nerves are affected. I will see the doctor to-day about you. You must be in bed at nine o'clock hereafter and you must stop all this sentimental folly."

"Mother, turn quickly," the Girl cried, "and you will see what is behind you; a vague, shadowy form, but very, very beautiful; and, Mother, it is trying to whisper in your ear."

And then the Mother turned, and lo! there stood the Spirit of her Lost Youth, and she looked straight in its eyes. "Why, I had quite forgotten you," she said very gently, after a silence.

"I thought so," replied the Phantom, "that is why I came. But I will not detain you. I only wanted to be remembered." And with a smile at the young Girl, the Phantom waved its hand and was gone.

And the Mother smiled, too, and went over and kissed her daughter, and said, "Well, one can be young but

once, and Paul is a good boy after all." And she went out softly.

And the Dream came back in the Girl's eyes.

TWO AT THE RESTAURANT

IV

TWO AT THE RESTAURANT

At neighbouring tables in the brilliant restaurant, filled with flowers, perfume, and beauty, sat two women, each with her escort.

One woman was young in years, but her sharp angles, her lustreless eye, her anæmic skin, and aggressive manner, all marked her as one whose attenuated and colourless soul was incapable of youth. The other woman had reached her meridian, and turned her face toward the afternoon of life.

She did not like the view; her eyes,

faded, yet still splendid, looked backward to the receding noon and morning hours; and always, wherever she might be, there the gaze of the multitude was drawn. She was like a magnificent hothouse rose, beautiful such a little while ago, and still exhaling fragrance, which no one can pass unmoved, even though its leaves are curled and its colour gone.

The orchestra drowned the rattle of silver and china and the hum of voices in the surging billows of the "Blue Danube Waltz." The young woman with the colourless soul was unstirred. Her critical and unkind glance was fastened on the neighbouring table. She smiled sarcastically and remarked to her companion: "Isn't it queer

some women cannot realize they are no longer young? The woman at the next table, for instance."

The woman with the soul of a rose had flushed into sudden semblance of her lost youth with the first strains of the immortal waltz of Strauss. Her widely-separated eyes had deepened in colour; the blood had leaped from her heart into her cheek; the lines about the corners of her beautiful mouth, made by the cruel finger of time, disappeared in a half-smile full of voluptuous reminiscences. She beat time to the music with one gloved hand, and unconsciously her graceful body swayed slightly from side to side. The eyes of her companion, a man younger than herself, rested tenderly upon her, but

she was not thinking of him. Other scenes, other hours, other men had risen before her vision. " Isn't she absurd ?" asked the thin, sharp voice of the young woman with the colourless soul.

But the man to whom she spoke did not answer aloud. He was a man of temperament—of experience and knowledge of human nature. Mutely he was saying to his companion: " Poor little weed that you are, how could you be expected to understand a hothouse bloom? Never, though you exist for a century, will life bring to you one hour of such intense emotion as have made years of this woman's life. Never will those sneering lips know one such kiss as has fallen upon her mouth in showers. Never will your cold eyes look into the

eyes of a man and read the answer to the riddle of the universe—great love given and received. Never will you know that wonderful hour of mutual conquest and subjugation. You are the arid sage-bush on the desert of life. She is the opulent rose—faded, yet still breathing forth a delicious fragrance. Even after her leaves fall utterly, she will be the rare vase containing them, and subtle incense will steal forth as long as the vase lasts. And you, in youth or age, will ever be the arid sage-bush on the desert."

But aloud the man spoke only to call the waiter and pay his cheque; and the two went out, leaving the woman with the soul of a rose still beating time to the rhythm of the "Blue Danube Waltz."

THE DEPARTURE

V

THE DEPARTURE

She had heard no echo of a footstep down the hall, no opening or closing of a door, no sound of a vehicle on the gravel carriage-way.

Yet she became suddenly conscious that a departure had taken place.

It was after she had risen from her perfumed bath, and, swathed in filmy, rose-colored draperies, passed between the mirrors which lined her boudoir on either side, that she paused, struck with the sudden sense of desolation.

How could this thing have happened so silently, and with no warning ?

Why had no one told her that it was soon to occur? Did others of her household know of the departure, and had she alone been kept in ignorance of the fact?

The thought was intolerable.

She swept across the spacious dressing-room, and knocked imperiously upon the door which led into the apartment of Love.

"I will ask him," she said, "and he must tell me if he knew of the departure, and when it took place."

But Love swung wide the portal, and met her with smiling eyes.

"You have slept well," he said. "You are radiant as the dawn." And he kissed her full upon the mouth.

"He does not know," she whispered

to her heart; "not yet. But he will know it soon, too soon."

Still, the vastness of her desolation seemed lessened by Love's smile and kiss.

While the maid arranged her beautiful hair, and selected the pretty frock from the bewildering array of delicate garments, she secretly watched the girl's face to see if any consequences of the departure could be surprised thereon.

"Madame will choose the pink bows for her hair this morning? They suit her fine colour so well."

It was at once a question and a decision, as the light hands held the velvet knots against the shell-tinted cheeks.

"Fanchette does not know," she said to her heart again. "But she will know soon; all the world will know. It cannot be hidden."

Her own knowledge of the departure bore more and more heavily upon her mind as the day passed.

Friends came, with pleasant words and sweet flatteries. She drove in the afternoon, and met throngs who craned their necks to see her pass in her carriage. At high tea she heard many compliments; and she dined with admiring friends, and spent a gay evening afterward; but she always kept the thought of the departure uppermost in her consciousness, and always she was saying to herself: "They do not know yet, for they would not dare laugh and jest in

face of my despair if they knew; but by-and-by——"

It was a long day, and she was glad when at last she was again in her boudoir.

Divested by deft hands of all her finery, her maid dismissed, she stood alone before the long triple mirrors and turned on a blaze of pitiless light.

Yes, it was quite true; that which she had discovered in the early morning for the first time was painfully evident now.

The perfect curve of her exquisite chin was broken; and between her brows the elusive line which had come and gone always like a passing shadow, indicating her changing moods, was

clearly discernible now. It was permanent.

Youth, radiant, fearless, adorable first youth, had taken its departure.

But while she stood with her face hidden in both hands, overwhelmed with the magnitude of her despair; there was a quick step, and a light knock on the door, and Love entered with outstretched arms.

"Why, my darling one, my beautiful one," he said, "what is the matter? Has anyone hurt you or grieved you?" And he kissed her once, twice, thrice, and a score of times, on her hair, and brow, and cheeks, and throat, and mouth.

Then she flung her arms about his neck and buried her face on his breast.

"Oh, it does not matter, it does not matter, after all!" she cried. And she laughed and sobbed all in one as she clung to him.

But when he questioned her about the cause of her tears, and asked her why she wept, she answered only:

"Just because."

For though she knew the departure had taken place, she would not be the first to mention it to Love, so wise was she, remembering that Love is blind.

THE MENDICANT

VI

THE MENDICANT

For the first time in her life the Woman entered a room timidly. It was a spacious room, well filled with women brave in festive attire.

The black and white uniforms of the hotel waiters gave the assemblage its only touch of masculinity.

Women of wealth and social position were there, women of genius, women who had made their mark in some field of endeavour; a few young, many middle aged, and some old women.

The Woman herself was old. She

had been conscious of it for almost a year; and now it came over her with new and unrelenting force, as she entered the room filled with others whose lives had been so unlike her own; whose ideals and pleasures had been so different, and whose favour she had come to crave.

The favour of human companionship.

She had always been used to taking what she wanted, without an effort. All her life she had received much for little, something for nothing; and now she was craving a little, and ready to give any price for it.

"I am surely very old, and very lonely," she said mentally, as she looked about her; "else how could I be seeking anything here?"

Yet as the friend who had brought her, a guest, to this brilliant assemblage, presented her to woman after woman, she looked in the face of each with a mute appeal.

She had been out of the sanatorium but a few months; the sanatorium where she had spent a long, long year, and where the consciousness was first forced upon her that her day of prowess was over.

It had been a long day; and even after the twilight had fallen, and the evening approached, she still imagined it broad day; and there was no one brave enough to tell her that her glory had departed, and that her prime, her beauty, and her vogue with men, were things of a past generation.

It was her mirror at the sanatorium that first spoke the brutal fact.

And then, after she came out into her world again, the same fact looked from the eyes of every man she met.

All men glanced at her indifferently, or showed her only the courtesies due to old age, while their attention was drawn elsewhere. Her presence had lost its compelling power. It awoke no interest, no admiration, no desire, nothing that meant life to her.

From the time she could remember, men had made her world; they had fought for her favour; they had loved her, or told her so; they had forgotten other women for her.

And she had gone through life intoxicated with the sense of her own

omnipotence; and, like a drunken man, she had believed herself happy. She had been too worldly wise, too cold, and too cautious, to lose her place in the world—a place won through a good man's name and fortune.

But she cared only for this place as a stage whereon she might display her powers of conquest.

Women were nothing, less than nothing to her. She always said that her sex seemed divided into two classes—stupid women, with only sense enough to be good; and weak women, foolish enough to be bad.

She prided herself upon being a man's woman; and always when she entered a room, men fluttered about her like insects about a point of flame.

Even after she passed her prime a romantic halo enveloped her, and rendered her interesting to certain types of young men. As, on a rainy day, they might seek an old chest and peruse yellow letters breathing forth strange perfumes, they sought her presence, which breathed of tragic experiences—of duels, of suicides, of a wife gone mad, of wise men grown fools through her power. So, long after men had ceased to care for her, she had taken their curiosity as an evidence of love, and flattered herself that she was still a dominating personality.

The first blow came when a young man who sought her society, assiduously said to her, "You must have been a great beauty in your day."

Then she knew her day was waning; was perhaps over.

The young man was an author, and he was studying her as a type. But she had not known that.

It was soon afterward that she fell very, very ill; and all through her sickness the words of the young man haunted her. Yes, she *had been* beautiful. And now it was all past. When she looked in her mirror again, she knew the terrible truth. She prayed to die—the first earnest prayer of her whole life; but Destiny was not ready to accord her such mercy. She, the merciless one, must live on, and on.

The years seemed to stretch before her, barren and desolate as the sands of

the desert to the lost traveller. Across the desert came a good Samaritan; one who had pity upon her; and so she was led out toward an oasis of human companionship.

She looked about the room, and saw little bevies of women scattered here and there, drinking tea, chatting, laughing, and all seemingly happy in the society of one another.

She did not care for any of them. She did not care for their pleasures. It was all dull—dreary and dull.

Yet to know these women—to count them as friends, to share such distractions as they had to offer—was the only thing life had to give her now.

She felt timid, old, an alien in their

midst; a mendicant begging for unpalatable food rather than slowly starve to death.

Oh, the bitter taste of Dead-Sea fruit!

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